
The Cultural Work of Sejong the Great

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T'aejong's foundations he did not find it necessary to be constantly preoccupied with administrative or political matters. But neither did he waste this stability by resting on his oars and giving himself over to a life of ease and comfort, as he might easily have done. Although he did not leave an explicit personal declaration of the policies he would follow, numerous casual remarks and the overall results of his reign allow us to see that he wanted to build a state in which Confucian institutions in both public and private life would be carefully cultivated, in which defense and security would be prudently attended to, in which agriculture, the "foundation of the state," would be brought to new levels of strength, and in which culture and education would be developed in a manner to compare favorably with the standards of the leading Chinese dynasties. National pride was an important element in these plans. Korean culture was not merely to imitate Chinese culture, but was consciously seen to require a distinctive Korean dimension. And this would serve the highest political purposes: in an international system in which Korea was in suzerain relationship to the Ming dynasty in China, Korea would create a self-defined standard of Confucian culture that would support a separate Korean legitimacy independent of China.

From Sejong's youth his intelligence and studiousness had been remarked by all, and in his encouragement of learning after he became king he was as much a participant as the presiding spirit. To serve as the guiding institution for his cultural policies, Sejong looked to an existing institution called the "Hall of the Wise" (Chiphyŏn chŏn). Established in 1399, it had languished on organizational charts until 1420, when Sejong reorganized it as an active organ of applied research, a kind of fifteenth-century Korean think tank. He staffed it with the best and the brightest young men that he could find. In 1426, a program of research grants was established, in which young men of unusual gifts could devote

themselves to advanced study away from the daily pressures of an official career. The library for the Hall of the Wise was completed in 1428. Education and scholarship were fostered throughout the kingdom, and books were collected and purchased, often in China, occasionally in Japan. In every way, Sejong worked to set a scholarly yet also pragmatic tone for his government.

The attention given by Sejong to study and research did not detract from his primary duties as king; in no sense was he a scholarly escapist. He opened his court each day at dawn (as was the custom in East Asian kingship), and after the ceremonial visits of his senior officials went directly to work on state affairs. He rarely accepted the opinions or arguments of petitioning officials without asking questions and contributing his own remarks, and not infrequently these were more to the point. In thousands of recorded discussions of this kind, he showed an evenness of judgment and a lack of prejudice. On one occasion, during a regular review of the national statutes, the question arose whether polo should be designated as an official support for the military. The relevant officials were against it on Confucian grounds (it supposedly diverted officers from full attention to their duties), and also because leaders of the preceding Koryŏ dynasty had reportedly pranced at polo while the Mongols were burning the country. Sejong admitted that the Koryŏ rulers had played it excessively, even to the detriment of the state, but he could see no harm in it as a military sport and indeed confessed his admiration for the skill and agility required of good players. (It probably helped that T'aejo, Chosŏn's founder and Sejong's grandfather, had excelled at the game.) He insisted that polo be reflected in the national statutes, "and, if later, people would denounce it, let them not play it." Such examples of flexibility and common sense gleam like scattered gems throughout the *Sejong sillok*, the official chronicle of his reign.